

The Blue Bead

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From deep water came the crocodile.

Out of black water, curved with whirlpools, and into the frill of gold shallows by the stepping-stones.

He was twice the length of a tall man; and inside him, among the stones which he had swallowed to aid digestion, rolled a silver bracelet.

Timber was being floated down this great Indian river from forests further up, and there were sleepers lying stuck around the stones until someone came to dislodge them and send them on their way, or until floods lifted them and jostled them along. The crocodile had no need to hide himself. He came to rest in the glassy shallows, among logs, and balanced there on tiptoe on the rippled sand, with only his raised eyes out of the water, and raised nostrils breathing the clean sunny air.

Around him broad sparkling water travelled between cliffs and grass and forested hills. A jungle track came out of scrub each side and down to the sun-whitened stepping-stones on which a little flycatcher was flirting and trilling along. The mugger crocodile, blackish brown above and yellowy white under, lay motionless, able to wait for ever till food came. This antediluvian saurian—this prehistoric juggernaut, ferocious and formidable, a vast force in the water, propelled by the unimaginable and irresistible power of the huge tail, lay lapped by ripples, a throb in his throat. His mouth, running almost the whole length of his head, was closed and fixed in that evil bony smile, and where the yellow underside came up to it, it was tinged with green.

From the day, perhaps a hundred years ago, when the sun had hatched him in a sandbank, and he had broken his shell, and got his head out and looked around, ready to snap at anything before he was even fully hatched—from that day, when he had at once made for the water, ready to fend for himself immediately, he had lived by his brainless craft and ferocity. Escaping the birds of prey and the great carnivorous fishes that eat baby crocodiles, he has prospered, catching all the food he needed, and storing it till putrid in holes in the bank. Tepid water to live in and plenty of rotted food grew him to his great length.

Now nothing could pierce the inch-thick armoured hide. Not even rifle bullets, which would bounce off. Only the eyes and the soft underarms offered a place. He lived well in the river, sunning himself sometimes with other crocodiles—muggers, as well as the long-snouted fish-eating gharials—on warm rocks and sandbanks where the sun dried the clay on them quite white, and where they could plop off into the water in a moment if alarmed.

The big crocodile fed mostly on fish, but also on deer and monkeys come to drink, perhaps a duck or two. But sometimes here at the ford he fed on a pi-dog full of parasites or a skeleton cow. And sometimes he went down to the burning ghats and found the half-burned bodies of Indians cast into the stream.

Beside him in the shoals as he lay waiting glimmered a blue gem.

It was not a gem, though: it was sand-worn glass that had been rolling about in the river for a long time. By chance, it was perforated right through—the neck of a bottle perhaps?—a blue bead.

In the shrill noisy village above the ford, out of a mud house the same colour as the ground came a little girl, a thin starveling child dressed in an earth-coloured rag. She had torn the rag in two to make skirt and sari.

Sibia was eating the last of her meal, chupatti wrapped round a smear of green chili and rancid butter; and she divided this also, to make it seem more, and bit it, showing straight white teeth.

With her ebony hair and great eyes, and her skin of oiled brown cream, she was a happy immature child-woman about twelve years old. Bare foot, of course, and often goosey-cold on a winter morning, and born to toil.

In all her life, she had never owned anything but a rag. She had never owned even one anna—not a pice, not a pi, even, to buy, say, a handful of blown glass beads from that stall in the bazaar where they were piled like stars, or one of the thin glass bangles that the man kept on a stick, and you could choose which colour you'd have.

She knew what finery was, though. She had been with her parents and brothers all through the jungle to the little town at the railhead where there was this bazaar. And she had walked through all the milling people, and the dogs and monkeys full of fleas, the idling gossiping bargaining humanity spitting betel juice, heard the bell of a sacred bull clonking as he lumped along through the dust and hubbub.

She had paused, amazed, before the sweetmeat stall, to gaze at the brilliant honey confections, abuzz with dust and flies. They smelled wonderful, above the smells of drains and humanity and cheap cigarettes. At home she sometimes tasted wild honey, or crunched the syrup out of a stalk of sugar cane. But these sweets were green and magenta.

Then there was the cloth stall, stacked with great rolls of new cotton cloth, stamped at the edge with the maker's sign of a tiger's head; and smelling so wonderful of its dressing, straight from the mills, that Sibia could have stood by it all day.

But there were other wonders to see: satin sewn with real silver thread, tin trays from Birmingham, and a sari which had got chips of looking-glass embroidered into the border. She joined the crowd round a Kashmiri travelling merchant on his way to the bungalows. He was showing dawncoloured silks that poured like cream, and he'd got a little locked chest with turquoises and opals in it. Best of all, a box which, when you pressed it, a bell tinkled and a yellow woollen chicken jumped out.

There was no end to the wonders of the world.

But Sibia, in all her life from birth to death, was marked for work. Since she could toddle, she had husked corn, and gathered sticks, and put dung to dry, and cooked and weeded, and carried, and fetched water, and cut grass for fodder.

She was going with her mother and some other women now to get paper grass from the cliffs above the river. When you had enough of it, you could take it down by bullock cart to the railhead and sell it to the agent who would arrange for its dispatch to the paper mills. The women often toiled all day at this work, and the agent sat on silk cushions, smoking a hookah.

Such thoughts did not trouble Sibia, however, as she skipped along with her sickle and homemade hayfork beside her mother. You could skip on the way out, but not on the way back when you ached with tiredness, and there was a great load to carry.

Some of the women were wearing necklaces made out of lal-lal-beeges, the shiny scarlet seeds, black one end, that grew everywhere in the jungle—it was best to have new necklaces each year, instead of last year's faded ones—and Sibia was making one too. How nice it was going to be to hear that rattling swish round her neck, as she froushed along with lots of necklaces. But each seed, hard as stone, had to be drilled with a red-hot needle, and the family needle was snapped, so she must wait till they could buy another.

Oh for strings and strings of glass and beads—anklets, earrings, noserings, bangles—all the gorgeous dazzle of the bazaar—all her little golden body decorated!

Chattering as they went, the women followed the dusty track toward the river. On their way, they passed a Gujar encampment of grass huts where these nomadic graziers would live for a time until their animals had perhaps finished all the easy grazing within reach, or they were not able to sell enough of their white butter and white milk in the district, or there was no one to buy the young male buffaloes for tiger-bait.

Or perhaps a cattle-killing tiger was making a nuisance of himself. Then they'd move on.

Sibia glanced at the Gujar women as she went past. They wore trousers, tight and wrinkled at the ankles, and in their ears large silver rings made out of melted rupees; and one of them was clinking a stick against the big brass gurrachs in which they fetched water from the river for the camp, to see which ones were empty. The men and boys were out of camp just now with the herd or gone to the bazaar to sell produce, but one or two buffaloes were standing about, creatures of great wet noses and moving jaws and gaunt black bones.

The Gujar women were junglis, as Sibia was too, born and bred in the forest. For countless centuries, their forebears had lived like this, getting their living from animals, from grass and trees, as they scratched their food together, and stored their substance in large herds and silver jewelry. They were Man in the wandering Pastoral Age, not Stone Age Hunters, and not yet Cultivators.

Ah, now there was the river, twinkling between the trees, sunlit beyond dark trunks. They could hear it rushing along.

The women came out on the shore, and made for the stepping-stones.

They had plenty to laugh and bicker about, as they approached the river in a noisy crowd. They girded up their skirts, so as to jump from stone to stone, and they clanked their sickles and forks together over their shoulders to have ease of movement. They shouted their quarrels above the gush of the river.

Noise frightens crocodiles. The big mugger did not move, and all the women crossed in safety to the other bank.

Here they had to climb a still hillside to get at the grass, but all fell to with a will, and sliced away at it wherever there was foothold to be had.

Down below them ran the broad river, pouring powerfully out from its deep narrow pools among the cold cliffs and shadows, spreading into warm shallows, lit by kingfishers. Great turtles lived there, and

mahseer weighing more than a hundred pounds. Crocodiles too. Sometimes you could see them lying out on those slabs of clay over there, but there were none to be seen at the moment.

Where Sibia was working, wind coming across hundreds of miles of trees cooled her sweating body, and she could look down over the river as if she were a bird. Although she did not dare stop for a moment under her mother's eye, her imagination took her in swooping flight over the bright water and golden air to the banks where she had played as a child.

In those cavelets above the high-water mark of the highest flood, she had stored some little bowls moulded of clay while they hardened. If there were anything that could be used for colouring, they would look fine, painted with marigolds and elephants.

"Child!"

The sharp word—the glare of her mother's angry sweating face, pulled Sibia back to work, and they toiled on.

But at last it was time to go back to see to their animals and the evening meal. The loaded women set out to cross the river again.

Sibia hung back. She would just dawdle a bit and run and see if the little clay cups were still there in the cave, waiting to be painted and used.

Although the women were now tired and loaded, they still talked. Those in front yelled to those behind. They crossed the river safely and disappeared up the track into the trees on the other side. Even their voices died away.

Silence fell.

Sibia came down alone to the stepping-stones.

The light of evening was striking up the gorge, pink into the ultraviolet shadows. Now that the sun was off it, the water poured almost invisible among the stones, with no reflection to show where it began. Sibia stepped onto the first stone.

She was heavily weighted, her muscles stretched and aching. The hayfork squeaked in the packed dry grass and dug into her collarbone so close under the skin, in spite of the sari bunched up to make a pad. When she was halfway over, she put her load down on a big boulder to rest; and leaned, breathing, on the fork.

At the same moment a Gujar woman came down with two gurrahs to the water on the other side. In order to get the good clear water, which would quickly fill both gurrahs to the top without sand, she walked onto the stepping-stones.

She was within a yard of the crocodile when he lunged at her.

Up out of the darkling water heaved the great reptile, water slushing off him, his livid jaws yawning and all his teeth flashing as he slashed at her leg.

The woman screamed, dropped both brass pots with a clatter on the boulder, from whence they bounced to the water, and Sibia saw them bob away in the current. *Oh, the two good vessels gone.*

The Gujar woman recoiled from the crocodile, but his jaws closed on her leg at the same moment as she slipped and fell on the bone-breaking stone, and clutched one of the timber logs to save herself.

The log jammed between two boulders, with the woman clinging to it and screaming, while the crocodile pulled on her leg, threshing his might tail—bang!—bang!—to and fro in great smacking flails as he tried to drag her free and carry her off down into the deeps of the pool. Blood spread everywhere.

Sibia sprang.

From boulder to boulder she came leaping like a rock goat. Sometimes it had seemed difficult to cross these stones, especially the big gap in the middle where the river coursed through like a bulge of glass. But now she came on wings, choosing her footing in midair without even thinking about it, and in one moment she was beside the shrieking woman.

In the boiling bloody water, the face of the crocodile, fastened round her leg, was tugging to and fro, and smiling.

His eyes rolled on to Sibia. One slap of the tail could kill her.

He struck. Up shot the water, twenty feet, and fell like a silver chain.

Again!

The rock jumped under the blow.

But in the daily heroism of the jungle, as common as a thorn tree, Sibia did not hesitate.

She aimed at the reptile's eyes.

With all the force of her little body, she drove the hayfork at the eyes, and one prong went in—right in—while its pair scratched past on the horny cheek.

The crocodile reared up in convulsion, till half his lizard body was out of the river, the tail and nose nearly meeting over his stony back. Then he crashed back, exploding the water, and in an uproar of bloody foam he disappeared.

He would die. Not yet, but presently, though his death would not be known for days; not till his stomach, blown with gas, floated him. Then perhaps he would be found upside down among the logs at the timber boom, with pus in his eye.

Sibia got her arms round the fainting woman, and somehow dragged her from the water. She stopped her wounds with sand, and bound them with rag, and helped her home to the Gujar encampment where the men made a litter to carry her to someone for treatment.

Then Sibia went back for her grass and sickle and fork.

The fork was lying in the river, not carried away, luckily, and as she bent to pick it up out of the water, she saw the blue bead. Not blue now, with the sun nearly gone, but a no-colour white-blue, and its shape wobbling in the movement of the stream. She reached her arm down into a yard of the cold silk water to get it. Missing it first of all, because of refraction.

Then there it lay in her wet palm, perfect, even pierced ready for use, with the sunset shuffled about inside it like gold-dust. All her heart went up in flames of joy.

After a bit she twisted it into the top of her skirt against her tummy so she would know if it burst through the poor cloth and fell.

Then she picked up her fork and sickle and the heavy grass and set off home. Ai! Ai! What a day!

Her bare feet smudged out the wriggle-mark of snakes in the dust; there was the thin singing of malaria mosquitoes among the trees now; and this track was much used at night by a morose old makna elephant—the

Tuskless One; but Sibia was not thinking of any of them. The stars came out: she did not notice.

On the way back she met her mother, out of breath, come to look for her, and scolding.

“I did not see till I was home, that you were not there. I thought something must have happened to you.”

And Sibia, bursting with her story, cried “Something *did*! I found a blue bead for my necklace, look!”

1. Think about your own values in relation to Sibia’s. Develop a chart to compare the two, using the following categories: Lifestyle, Threats to Safety, Life Goals, Role of Children, Education, Treasure or Wealth, Nature of Work, Sources of Self-Worth.

2. The story begins with a detailed description of the crocodile, before shifting to Sibia’s perspective. In small groups, discuss why the author chose to begin her story this way. In your discussion, consider other ways that the story could be structured. Share your ideas with the rest of the class.

3. Working in pairs, present Sibia’s story as a news item for a North American television news station. What details will you emphasize? Who will you interview? How will you grab your viewers’ attention?